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ABSTRACT

This lesson seeks to sensitize students to the complex nature of revenge as it is portrayed in William Shakespeare's "The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark." In the lesson, students learn how Shakespeare's play interprets Elizabethan attitudes toward revenge, as reflected in the structure of the Elizabethan revenge tragedy, one of the most popular forms of drama of the Elizabethan era. Intended for high school students, the lesson: cites subject areas, time required, and skills developed; provides an introduction; poses a guiding question; presents learning objectives; gives tips for teachers preparing to teach the lesson; suggests (and delineates) five classroom activities; offers suggestions for extending the lesson; lists Web resources; and addresses standards alignment. It is noted that a second lesson, "Chusingura: Traditions of the Revenge Tragedy," builds on this lesson on Hamlet, paralleling this study with comparisons of Hamlet and the Elizabethan revenge ethic to the Japanese Bunraku/Kabuki play "Kanadehon Chushingura" and the Tokugawa revenge ethic. Two worksheets are attached. (NKA)

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CS 511 997

Hamlet and the Elizabethan Revenge Ethic in Text and Film

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GRADES 9–12

Introduction

This lesson seeks to sensitize students to the complex nature of revenge as it is portrayed in Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Students learn how Shakespeare's play interprets Elizabethan attitudes toward revenge, as reflected in the structure of the Elizabethan revenge tragedy, one of the most popular forms of drama of that era.

Note: This lesson may be taught either as a stand-alone lesson or as preparation for the complementary EDSITEment lesson, Hamlet Meets Chushingura: Traditions of the Revenge Tragedy. The second lesson builds on this lesson, paralleling this study with comparisons of Hamlet and the Elizabethan revenge ethic to the Japanese Bunraku/Kabuki play Kanadehon Chushingura and the Tokugawa revenge ethic

Guiding Question:

What are the implications of honor, loyalty, and revenge in the Elizabethan culture as presented in Shakespeare's play Hamlet? How do these implications resonate in modern times and in modern film?

Learning Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- Describe Elizabethan attitudes toward revenge from documents of the period
- Recognize Elizabethan theatrical conventions and their impact on the play
- Analyze the playwright's use of characters' language and actions to motivate the avengers in the play
- Compare the text with modern film interpretation
- Recognize the acts of revenge in the play as attempts to satisfy the characters' longing for justice but as destructive forces on the avengers and those whose lives are affected by them
- Analyze Hamlet's desire to reduce his situation to a matter of right versus wrong and action versus inaction and evaluate the dangers of such a reduction.

Preparing to Teach this Lesson

- This lesson may be taught either as a stand-alone lesson or as preparation for the complementary EDSITEment lesson, Hamlet Meets Chushingura: Traditions of the Revenge Tragedy. The second lesson builds on this lesson, paralleling this study with comparisons of Hamlet and the Elizabethan revenge ethic to the Japanese Bunraku/Kabuki play Kanadehon Chushingura and the Tokugawa revenge ethic.
- This lesson and the complementary EDSITEment lesson require only the student texts of *Hamlet* available in the school. However, a useful text, especially for teachers is *Hamlet: The Cambridge School Shakespeare* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994), for its resources on Elizabethan revenge tragedy and Elizabethan views of tragedy. It contains excellent information on Hamlet as a character and on the

Hamlet and His Mother, Eugène Delacroix (French, 1798–1863). Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, an EDSITEment-reviewed website.

Subject Areas
Literature and Language Arts

British

Drama

Poetry

Time Required
7 -8 Class Periods

Skills
rea ding literary texts
critical analysis
literary interpretation
drawing inferences and comparisons research skills
internet skills

Additional Data
Dat e Created: 06/21/2002

stage history of the play as well. A VCR and monitor are needed in the classroom on days when students will view and work with scenes from one or more film versions of the play. Discussing at least one film interpretation of this play affords students the opportunity to observe the kinds of choices modern directors must make as they seek to move their vision from text to film. Legal permission to use the film or films in class must be obtained. If only one film version can be shown, Kenneth Branagh's version (Castle Rock, 1996) is of particular value because it is the only version to include the entire text, and students can follow the film easily after studying the corresponding scenes in their texts. Another current version that offers many opportunities for comparison is Franco Zeffirelli's, starring Mel Gibson (Warner Brothers, 1990), which offers a medieval setting, a different opening scene in the film, and many abridgements and movements of text and scenes. Finally students may find Michael Almereyda's version (2000), starring Ethan Hawke, especially exciting and relevant, although much of the text has been cut, and the setting changes to the fast-track world of modern New York City. Comparing the final scenes of all three versions would allow students to experience different time periods, settings, and effects and would also help them to realize that Shakespeare is '"not of an age, but for all time."

- Launching onto the study of Hamlet does not require an introductory lesson on historical context until questions about the play emerge from class discussion, especially as the revenge plot starts to take shape. However, students need to become familiar with Elizabethan attitudes toward revenge and the popularity of revenge tragedies, which are included online in "Francis Bacon's thoughts on revenge" and the first and second pages of Ian Johnston's "Introductory Lecture on Shakespeare's Hamlet". (Also helpful on Elizabethan attitudes toward revenge is the Cambridge version of the play.)

Suggested Activities

1: The Revenge Plots Emerge: Act I

2: Revenge Turns Deadly: Act III scene iv

3: Violence Begets Violence: Act IV, scene v

4: The Revenge Plots Merge: Act V, scene ii

5: The Film's the Thing: The Revenge Plots On Celluloid

1. The Revenge Plots Emerge: Act I

- Begin study of the opening scene of Hamlet by assigning roles to volunteers and reading small sections of the scene aloud, then discussing them. Your taking the role of Horatio or assigning it to a proven reader allows the most difficult portions of text to flow conversationally and be clearer in meaning to the class. Stopping every few lines to ask what students have learned allows them to become familiar with the situation, setting, and language, especially in terms of the unusual challenge by Bernardo, the inability of the characters to see one another, the time of night and weather conditions, the relationships among the characters, and the lack of information the guards have about why they are on such a "strict and most observant watch" as the nation prepares for war.
- Once the class has discussed King Hamlet's duel to the death with King Fortinbras and his winning of Fortinbras's lands, students can begin to understand the loss that Prince Fortinbras had to face with the death of his father and the loss of his birthright, as well as the fact that he did not inherit the throne. Although Horatio says that the rules of the combat were carefully drawn and legally binding, Prince Fortinbras is apparently determined to take back his father's lands by military means, even though the man who killed his father and won his lands is now dead. The class can then understand why Prince Fortinbras would choose this time to march on Denmark. This discussion anticipates Claudius' comments in Act I, scene ii and sets the stage for the students to learn more about Elizabethan attitudes toward revenge.
- After you have discussed the opening of the play, you may wish to share with students "Francis Bacon's thoughts on revenge", which may help them to understand the prevailing attitudes toward revenge during Shakespeare's time. (At this time, students may also find the discussion of Elizabethan revenge tragedy in the Cambridge *Hamlet* of great benefit.) Once they have reviewed and listed the characteristics, have them refer to their Hamlet texts to find examples of these characteristics. They will also find that the first and second pages of Ian Johnston's "Introductory Lecture on Shakespeare's

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Hamlet" include a helpful discussion of the context for revenge in Hamlet. (Ask students to go online and click on Francis Bacon's remarks, then save in a text file, and highlight the important points he makes. They can then make a copy of their work to keep so that they can refer to it as they continue the play. They could use a different technique by creating their own file, then copying and pasting only those points they feel are important enough to save. Ian Johnston's essay material also lends itself to this kind of exercise and can link with the online Bacon activity or with the activities at the close of study of Act I.)

- As discussion of Act I, scene ii develops, ask students to identify specific examples of Hamlet's language of anger and anguish concerning the marriage of his mother to Claudius (Act I scene ii) and its resonance in the Ghost's depiction of his murder and the subsequent marriage (Act I scene v). Ask them about the effects of the Ghost's images and repetition on Hamlet as shown in Hamlet's remarks to the Ghost and subsequent soliloquy and behavior. The Ghost's repetition of Hamlet's key words and imagery suggests the closeness of father and son but even more vividly the Ghost's ability to sway Hamlet to do his bidding of avenging his murder. Examples include the following:

Hamlet's words	**Ghost's echo**
"Seems, madam?..."	*"...seeming virtuous queen."*
"Foul deeds will rise..."	*"Murder most foul..."*
"...incestuous sheets..."	*"...that incestuous, adulterate beast."*
"...unweeded garden..."	*"...the fat weed that roots itself on Lethe wharf..."*
"Things rank and gross..."	*"...rankly abused."*

Individual students or small groups can search out key words and phrases the Ghost echoes from Hamlet's earlier comments from Act I with the help of a Hamlet and the Ghost Chart, provided here as a downloadable PDF file, in conjunction with the online resource Concordance.com, a link from the EDSITEment-reviewed Internet Public Library, or the online MIT text of Hamlet Ask students to locate Act I of Hamlet in the MIT text and in their own texts. Students should use the "find on page" function on their Internet browser. (In Microsoft Internet Explorer, click "edit," followed by "find on this page.") When the "find" button takes them to a particular spot, they should determine where they are by finding the corresponding line in their texts, then determine how the word is used and echoed and whether the use and echo are appropriate. If they deem the example appropriate, they should record the example, scene, and line. If they have access to a word processing program (such as MS Word), they can cut and paste relevant passages and record them on the blank chart provided. Then at the bottom of the chart, they can add any other techniques they notice that Shakespeare uses to strengthen the Ghost's impact on Hamlet. If for some reason students are unable to search this online text, an alternative/backup online option for searching Act I of Hamlet is available from the online resource Concordance.com, a link from the EDSITEment-reviewed Internet Public Library If time and classroom setting allow, ask students if anything specific comes to mind with the Ghost's serpent image of Claudius. This question can lead to a discussion of the biblical images present that Elizabethan audiences would immediately grasp and their view of the enormity of the villainy allegedly committed. Follow up this discussion by asking them about the effects of the Ghost's images and repetition on Hamlet as shown in Hamlet's remarks to the Ghost and subsequent soliloquy and behavior. Then have them refer to their information on Elizabethan revenge plays to compare the Ghost's commands and imagery with those of the typical revenge play of that period.

- The Ghost's first mention of his murder sparks Hamlet's immediate remark concerning the swiftness he will use to "sweep" to his revenge, certainly an ironic response in light of his later chastisement of self for his slowness of action. Such examples, as well as the Ghost's gruesome description of the effects of the "leprous distilment" of poison and Claudius' serpent like behavior, aligning him with Eden's serpent, all motivate Hamlet to swear his determination to avenge his father's murder. The Ghost's ironic final words of "Remember me" as a call to revenge echo the Eucharistic words of Christ, stressing the impact and significance of Hamlet's commitment, which he immediately echoes upon the Ghost's exit. These literary techniques help to establish the call to action of the loyal son that will "taint" the mind of Hamlet as he seeks to fulfill his promise honorably.

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2. Revenge Turns Deadly: Act III scene iv

This scene, the "closet scene," clearly reveals what havoc is caused by Hamlet's striking the arras upon hearing the voice calling for help. As students recall Hamlet's telling Claudius that the name of the play is "The Mousetrap" and Hamlet's decision to "trip" Claudius during some "act /That hath no relish of salvation isn't"(III.iii), they will understand Hamlet's mistake but realize that there are consequences to such an irreparable act. If they then refer to their information on revenge tragedy, they can see how Hamlet's action fits the description of the typical avenger. Students may also explore what Gertrude thinks of his behavior and what Hamlet believes to be his role as avenger when he tells his mother that he must be "scourge and minister." If students compare these findings to the structure of the typical revenge tragedy, they can then understand how Hamlet's action compares to Claudius' killing of King Hamlet. Students can discern Hamlet's plan to dispense with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by closely examining his last remarks to his mother: Hamlet aligns them with Claudius, the serpent king, by his referral to them as "adders fang'd." If students then remember Hamlet's description of them, they will notice how the metaphor foreshadows Hamlet's actions toward them and his attitude about those actions (V.ii.).

3. Violence Begets Violence: Act IV, scene v

Have students read this scene aloud, in which Claudius coerces Laertes to murder Hamlet. Compare Claudius's coercion of Laertes with the Ghost's commands to Hamlet. While both father figures play on the son's love of and loyalty to his father, the Ghost motivates Hamlet with the description of King Hamlet's death and Gertrude's seduction yet provides no guidance to Hamlet's revenge other than to avoid tainting his mind and hurting his mother. Claudius, however, does not dwell on the father's death but instead on what Laertes can do to show his love for his father by punishing Hamlet; he generates a dishonorable plan of revenge for which Laertes can "be the instrument" of Hamlet's destruction.

Once students read aloud this coercion scene, they can identify the steps that Claudius uses to goad Laertes into revenge. If they refer to Act I, scene v or to their charts from Act I, they can then compare Claudius' techniques with Laertes to those of the Ghost with Hamlet. Of particular interest is a comparison of Laertes' versus Hamlet's attitudes toward revenge, including the basic similarities and differences in their evaluations of self and personal commitment. Ask students to refer to the worksheet, The Language of Revenge, provided here as a downloadable PDF document. Students can use the blank chart in this worksheet to compare Laertes' comments in Act IV, scenes v and vii, with Hamlet's earlier comments in his talk with the Ghost and his soliloquies throughout the play. Using the MIT online Hamlet and their own texts for line numbers, students can search out and paste into the chart parallel quotations from the two avengers that exemplify their similarities and differences. This activity is also possible for comparing the Ghost's techniques with those of Claudius.

4. The Revenge Plots Merge: Act V, scene ii

- The two revenge plots merge just as the language of these characters starts to merge as well. Examples include:

  Hamlet's "conscience does make cowards of us all"(Act III) with Laertes' "almost against my conscience" The Ghost's "The serpent that did sting thy father's life" (Act I) with Hamlet's description of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as "adders fang'd"(Act III), Claudius' "venomed stuck"(Act IV), Laertes' "unbated and envenomed," and Hamlet's "...envenomed too? Then venom, to thy work..."

- A class discussion of Laertes' corrupt revenge as compared to Hamlet's revenge provides students an opportunity to evaluate and compare Hamlet's destruction of others' lives with Laertes's illegal and lethal use of his rapier. Referring to their online comparisons from Act IV can help students to evaluate the revenge of each avenger. Students may then also wish to discuss Claudius' behavior and death, what constitutes villainous behavior in the play, and what the differences are in justice versus revenge. The deaths associated with Hamlet's revenge and the attitudes toward death, especially suicide, provide students with different views of life and its value in relation to honor and loyalty. From Hamlet's first soliloquy to the announcement of Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's deaths, the loss of life in this

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play, whether pitiful or valiant, cowardly or ironic, reflects a world in which good as well as evil must suffer but concepts such as honor and loyalty provide the context for life's meaning.

- Finally, discuss the strategic entrance of Prince Fortinbras, who does not know he has been left the kingdom, but views the "havoc," recalls his "rights of memory," embraces his fortune, and orders for Hamlet a military funeral since "...he was likely, had be been put on,/To have prov'd most royal." Remind the class of the description of Prince Fortinbras given in the opening scene of the play and of the "warlike volley" mentioned in this last scene. Ask them to characterize Fortinbras' handling of his own desires for revenge as discussed in Act II scene ii.

5. The Film's the Thing: The Revenge Plots On Celluloid

- Depending upon the time available in class, you may want to show the opening scene of Kenneth Branagh's film of Hamlet to explore how Branagh deals on film with Prince Fortinbras' determination to regain his father's lands. You may also want to ask how this treatment of Prince Fortinbras affects the audience's perception of him and how this visualization affects the tone of the first scene. You may also want to show Claudius' description of young Fortinbras as he speaks to this issue (I.ii) and explore how Claudius' description of a prince who "pesters" Claudius for his lands compares to what the audience has seen of Fortinbras so far in the film.
- Before showing Act I, scene v of Branagh's film, ask students to write down several film techniques they notice that Branagh uses to vivify Hamlet's meeting with the Ghost. When they share their findings, make a list on the board, then discuss what each of the techniques accomplishes in the film and how successful it is. Pay particular attention to the flashback technique that helps the audience visualize the death described by the Ghost and fills a long interval of description in the text during which the Ghost talks and Hamlet listens. The upheaval in the earth helps to vivify the "unnatural" nature of the death and the "foul deeds" rising to Hamlet's eyes. Hamlet's soliloquy of commitment incorporates physical signs of shock to match the language of revenge. The staging of this scene contrasts greatly with other film versions, especially Zeffirelli's version starring Mel Gibson.
- Act IV, scene v of the film allows students to visualize Claudius' coercion of Laertes. Ask them how much of Claudius' story of Hamlet's envy of Laertes' prowess with rapier and dagger they believe, based on their knowledge of the text and observations of Claudius in the film. Have them justify their answers with examples of Claudius' behavior toward Laertes as the scene progresses. Compare this scene to the Ghost's recounting of his death to Prince Hamlet.
- In Branagh's Hamlet, Act V, scene ii, he surprises us with juxtaposition of Hamlet's bout with Laertes and Fortinbras' stealthy attack, heightening tension and paralleling Hamlet's eventual revenge. Though lacking firm basis in the text, this interpretation has some possible foundation in Act IV scene iv. Ask students how Fortinbras' attack and takeover affect the Elizabethan attitudes toward revenge and the revenge tragedy. In this final scene, chandelier swinging and swashbuckling sword techniques, especially camera effects on the soaring sword, are reminiscent of Kevin Costner's Robin Hood. Ask students how these techniques affect the play and their views toward Hamlet's final revenge. Fortinbras' secret attack and takeover help to create the tone for the final moments and impact. How does the divided focus affect the impact of what Hamlet is trying to accomplish and how the audience views the ending? The ultimate return to the exterior of the palace creates a sense of closure. Though the soldiers' carrying Hamlet's body differs little from other versions, destruction of the statue/Ghost figure uniquely completes the destruction of royal family with fulfillment of the Ghost's mission and his commands in Act I to Hamlet. Ask students how the dismantling of the statue might be symbolic and how this ending meshes with Elizabethan attitudes toward revenge. Dismantling of King Hamlet's statue, from which the Ghost originally came, parallels the dismantling of the kingdom of Denmark, now in foreign hands. Contrasting this final scene with Zeffirelli's version with Mel Gibson, which excludes any entrance of Fortinbras at all, offers possibilities for discussion of international versus individual tragedies and the potential power of each.

Extending the Lesson

- Additional questions for students may include:
  - What have we learned about the nature of revenge in Elizabethan culture and our modern American culture?
  - What has made this play and story live on?
  - What are some ways modern film has changed this play?
  - What do these film changes imply about directors' expectations of their audiences?
- Suitable assessments for this unit include tests for content specific to the lesson, an essay comparing elements of Hamlet's character with the attributes of the typical Elizabethan revenge tragedy or to the

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other avengers in the play, or an essay worksheet placing students as directors of the "consummate" film version of Hamlet and the choices and justification they would make for actors, setting, costuming, and focus of the film.

- Guide students in a comparison of key scenes of Franco Zeffirelli's film version of Hamlet, starring Mel Gibson and Glen Close, to Kenneth Branagh's version discussed in this lesson.
- Have students use sites from the EDSITEment Resources section in this lesson to conduct further research on Hamlet, the sources of Hamlet, projects, and other related topics.
- Parallel or follow this lesson with the next lesson in this series: Hamlet Meets Chushingura: Traditions of the Revenge Tragedy.

Selected EDSITEment Websites

- Mr. Shakespeare and the Internet [http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/]:
  - Hamlet Criticism [http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/playcriticism.htm] Features numerous critical essays on Hamlet, including T.S. Eliot's famous "Hamlet and His Problems" and Ian Johnston's "An Introduction to Hamlet."
  - Hamlet "Teacher's Guide and Student Activities," by Joel Sommer Littauer [http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/Hamlet/hamletwebguide.html] Includes web sources, essay types and topics, as well as guide and student activities.
  - "Francis Bacon's thoughts on revenge"
  - *Shakespeare Magazine* [http://www.shakespearemag.com/] Includes issues focused on the teaching of Hamlet, including the magazine's first issue, Spring 2002. Excellent articles to help with understanding Hamlet, teaching Hamlet, and using the Internet to provide activities for students.
  - "Teacher CyberGuide: The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark," [http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/ham/hamtg.html] by Kathryn Bayne. Includes links to text, plot, characters, study questions, activities, and Internet discussions of Hamlet.
  - Concordance.com to be used with the "Hamlet and the Ghost" PDF chart supplied with this lesson.
  - MIT text of Hamlet to be used with the "Language of Revenge" PDF chart supplied with this lesson.

Other Information

Standards Alignment

1. NAES-Theatre- 9-12-5

   Researching by evaluating and synthesizing cultural and historical information to support artistic choices

2. NAES-Theatre- 9-12-7

   Analyzing, critiquing, and constructing meanings from informal and formal theatre, film, television, and electronic media productions

3. NAES-Theatre- 9-12-8

   Understanding context by analyzing the role of theatre, film, television, and electronic media in the past and the present

4. NCTE/IRA-1

Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works. more

5. NCTE/IRA-2

   Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience. more

6. NCTE/IRA-7

   Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience. more

Student's Name _____

On the following blank chart, list Hamlet's remarks that the Ghost echoes in Act I, scene v. Then provide the Ghost's subsequent echoing remark in the corresponding column.

Hamlet's words and phrases	Act/scene/line(s)	Ghost's echoing words	Act/scene/line(s)

Once you have finished filling in the previous chart, list other techniques you observed that Shakespeare used to strengthen the Ghost's influence over Hamlet.

Shakespeare's technique	Act/scene/line(s)	Influence on Hamlet	Act/scene/line(s)

Language of Revenge

http://edsitement.neh.gov

Student's Name _____

Compare Hamlet's comments in his talk with the Ghost and in his soliloquies in Acts I-IV with Laertes' comments in Act IV, scenes v and vii, about revenge, self, and personal commitment.

Hamlet's comments	Act/scene/line(s)	Laertes' comments	Act/scene/line(s)

Thoughts on revenge:

Thoughts on self:

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Hamlet's comments	Act/scene/line(s)	Laertes' comments	Act/scene/line(s)

Thoughts on personal commitment:

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